

Title:

Craft(ing) Narratives: Specimens, Souvenirs, and “Morsels” in A la Ronde’s Specimen Table

Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between souvenir acquisition and the construction of narrative in the interior decoration of A la Ronde in Devon, home to cousins Jane and Mary Parminter between 1796 and 1849. During this period of homosocial cohabitation, the Parminters ornamented the property with a variety of handcrafted objects and spaces, often fabricated from souvenirs, found objects, and pieces from their family collection. While the secondary literature on A la Ronde has emphasised the appropriacy of ‘feminine’ crafts such as shell- and paper-work for the decoration of a space of this nature, this article goes beyond this focus to reveal how the cousins used material objects to create complex domestic, familial, and touristic narratives. Focusing on a specimen table made around 1790, the article situates its production in relation to the histories of the Parminter family, their residence in Devon, and their extensive Continental tour. Utilising frameworks from contemporary travel writing, it demonstrates how the collection and creation of such objects was indivisible from the construction of narrative.

Keywords:

craft; souvenir; tourism; A la Ronde; found object

In 1902, the Rev. Oswald Joseph Reichel (1840-1923) published “Extracts from a Devonshire Lady’s Notes of Travel in France in the Eighteenth Century” in *Report and Transactions: The Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*.² The titular extracts were transcribed from Devonshire resident Jane Parminter’s (1750-1811) travel journal, written during her Continental tour of c.1784-1791, which was undertaken with her sister Elizabeth (1756-c.1790), her first cousin Mary (1767-1849), and another unknown female traveller. The extracts comprise the first six weeks of their tour, tracing their journey from Devon to Dijon, and their consistency and detail hint towards what must have been a much more extensive travel narrative written by Jane. Sadly, like much of the Parminter archive, these journals are now lost. Yet in contrast with this scant archival record, the Parminters’ surviving material heritage—located at Jane and Mary Parminter’s home A la Ronde in Exmouth, Devon—is vast, and tells its own narratives of travel, home, and family.

A la Ronde was designed to the Parminters’ specifications following their return from their tour.³ The house is a curious, sixteen-sided building, apparently inspired by the octagonal form of the San Vitale basilica in Ravenna, and features unusual diamond-shaped windows, bordered in red. The appearance of the house was so unique that visitors throughout the nineteenth century compared its form with buildings from China and the South Pacific Islands.⁴ Originally, the house was limewashed and thatched, and would have evoked the fashionable rusticity of the *cottage orné*, with its current slated roof one of several major alterations completed at the behest of Reichel, its sole male owner.⁵ Beyond the unusual appearance of its exterior, A la Ronde is perhaps best known for its complex interior schemes, which were designed and executed by Jane and Mary Parminter.

The daughters of affluent merchant families, Jane and Mary became independently wealthy upon the death of their parents, which facilitated their extensive period of travel and subsequent cohabitation as unmarried women at A la Ronde. The cousins lived together at the house from around 1796 until Jane’s death in 1811, after which point Mary lived alone at the property until

¹ Anna Riggs Miller, *Letters from Italy, Describing the Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Paintings, &c. of that Country* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1776-7), 1:154. References are to this edition.

² Oswald Reichel, “Extracts from a Devonshire Lady’s Notes of Travel in France in the Eighteenth Century,” *Report and Transactions: The Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, no. 34 (1902): 265-277.

³ For biographical information on Jane and Mary Parminter, including the Parminter family tree, see Trevor Adams, *The A la Ronde Story: Its People* (Exmouth, Devon: National Trust, 2011).

⁴ Hugh Meller, *A la Ronde* (Swindon: National Trust Publishing Ltd. 1991), 3.

⁵ Meller, 4. The role that the Parminters played in the design of A la Ronde has been the subject of much debate. It is now common consensus that whilst the cousins were not the architects of the property per se, they had an active role in the design of the building. See Lynne Walker, “The Entry of Women into the Architectural Profession in Britain,” *Woman’s Art Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1986): 13-18.

her own death in 1849.⁶ It was during their period of cohabitation that the women ornamented the house with their varied collections, detailed shell-, feather-, and paperwork interiors, and handcrafted furniture.

A close focus on this rich body of material culture allows for a complication and enrichment of the current scholarship on A la Ronde, which has often followed the expressly feminine agenda expounded by Mary Parminter's last will and testament (1850).⁷ The will is a vital source for understanding how the Parminters themselves viewed their decoration and cultivation of the homosocial space of A la Ronde. Firstly, it provides strict instructions for the inheritance of A la Ronde, stipulating that only a female inheritor could claim ownership of the property.⁸ Entrance into marriage, making alterations, and failure to maintain the house and gardens could all cause disinheritance and revocation of legal title to the estate. These explicit strictures demonstrate that the construction, decoration, and projected legacy of A la Ronde was an essential aspect of the Parminters' creation of an explicitly gendered space, providing a home where feminine accomplishment could flourish, sustained and protected throughout the succeeding centuries. The document therefore invites us to consider the complexly delimited inheritance of the house as a form of distinctively female heirlooming, which was constitutive in A la Ronde's construction of a gendered social identity both in the eighteenth century and amongst its subsequent owners.

Accordingly, existing interpretations of A la Ronde's comprehensive interior scheme have relied upon the apparent equivalency between its status as a kind of homosocial utopia, and the appropriacy of 'feminine' forms of artistic practices, such as shell-, feather-, and paperwork, as decoration for a space of this kind. The architectural historian Colin Cunningham, for example, cites A la Ronde as "an important example of what has come to be seen as 'feminine taste,'" while Amanda Vickery characterises its decoration as "a rampant culture of flamboyant ornamentation" suggestive of the "virtuous consecration to a domestic cloister of curiosities and a luxuriant exfloreation of femininity."⁹ Highlighting the Parminters' knowing cultivation of a specifically feminine space, ratified legally through Mary Parminter's last will and testament, such interpretations gender A la Ronde's interiors as distinctively female, emphasising the inherently feminine nature of both the kinds of objects collected at A la Ronde, as well as the craft practices

⁶ Adams.

⁷ Mary Parminter, Probate of Will, 26 January 1850. 1313012, National Trust Collections, A la Ronde, Devon. See also Adams, 25.

⁸ Adams, 11-12.

⁹ Colin Cunningham, "'An Italian house is my lady': some aspects of the definition of women's role in the architecture of Robert Adam," *Masculinity and Femininity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture*, eds. Michael Rossington & Gill Perry, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 71. Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 248.

enacted at the house more generally. Yet while Mary Parminter's will stresses her anticipated construction of an explicitly feminine future for A la Ronde, the bricolaged surfaces and spaces of the house express more than this agenda.

This article argues that it is crucial to conceptualise the house's ornamentation both in relation to the Parminters' creation of a female space, and the experiences of the Parminter family more broadly, which includes their Continental travel, subsequent life at A la Ronde, and the powerful affective bonds established between the women. Through consideration of the Parminters as at once seasoned travellers, residents of Devon, family members, and women, the article situates the material culture of the house in relation to these competing narratives and identities. Focusing on A la Ronde's specimen table, whose fragmentary form comprises a complex bricolage of objects, the article expands upon the existing scholarship examining A la Ronde itself, as well as the Grand Tour and its associated material culture. Moving beyond a focus on the inherent femininity of A la Ronde, it highlights how the decoration of the house worked more broadly to construct and reflect the cousins' relationships with each other, their extended families, and their experiences of home and abroad. Tracing the small-scale souvenir objects included within the table, whether found or purchased; acquired at home or overseas; readymade or handcrafted, it reinforces the fluidity inherent to the very category of the souvenir, thereby encouraging a more inclusive and diverse definition of what a Grand Tour souvenir might have been.

In the face of the relative absence of A la Ronde's archival record, the article uses contemporaneous travel writing to examine the key conceptual frameworks surrounding these disparate forms, situating the constituent elements of the Parminters' specimen table in relation to the accounts of object-acquisition found in the travel writing of their contemporaries. Various creating physical, sensory, and emotional narratives within these texts, the evocative nature of such written encounters suggests the complementary narrative potential of these objects as used in the Parminters' own table. Existing between written text and physical object, the acquisition of the souvenir and the creation of narrative were closely aligned. Citing numerous materially-centred texts, the article demonstrates how the specimens, souvenirs, morsels, and found objects that comprised the table were essential to its construction of narrative. These narratives, however, extended well beyond travel, encompassing the Parminters' subsequent life at A la Ronde and their close familial ties, with their carefully constructed specimen table itself constructing intersecting narratives of travel, family, and home.

Specimens and Souvenirs

During their travels, the Parminters accumulated a diverse collection of souvenirs, including plaster copies of intaglio gemstones, fragments of precious minerals, shell-pictures, and prints, many of which were subsequently displayed within their home. Once established at A la Ronde, the cousins used these souvenirs alongside an array of materials sourced from their coastal locale, such as shells, mineral fragments, sand, locally-sourced textiles, stones, bones, spar, glass, and mica, which together fabricated the wide selection of crafts practiced, and furnishings made by the cousins.

One such object is a small octagonal worktable, which comprises a hollow rosewood base decorated with floral decoupage, surmounted by a collaged plane of souvenirs covered with a glass panel (figs. 1 and 2). The table's top is a colourful bricolage of visual and textural contrast, featuring natural materials, purchased *objets d'art*, and copies from the antique. As such, the table is reminiscent of specimen tables purchased by Grand Tourists throughout the eighteenth century. However, instead of classical marbles alone, its specimens include shells collected from the shores of Devon's beaches, two ovals of lapis lazuli, two micromosaics, a selection of plaster casts taken after antique cameos and intaglio gemstones, and centremost, a ceramic plaque depicting a vestal virgin and that reads "LIFE SHALL TRIUMPH OVER DEATH". Various acquired during its makers' Continental tour; collected from the coastal locality of the house; and purchased to suggest enduring familial bonds; collectively these souvenir-objects tell distinctive yet complementary personal histories of the Parminter family. In this intricate arrangement, the souvenir functions as a biographical object, one that signifies a relationship between material culture and the construction of narrative.

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 here]

Jane & Mary Parminter, Table, 1790s.

Glass, Mineral, Shell, Paint, Paper, Wood

National Trust Collections, A la Ronde, Devon.

Combining souvenirs from home and abroad, the cousins' carefully crafted table exemplifies how these objects worked together. In both its form and decoration, the specimen table reproduces the kinds of objects seen and acquired by tourists during their travels around Continental Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. So-named after the specimens of rare marbles and semi-precious stones of which they were comprised, the constituent fragments of such tables were reputedly sourced from ruins, archaeological excavations, and the

destruction of ancient monuments.¹⁰ Examples of specimen tables are mentioned in a number of accounts written by travellers from this period. Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741-1821), for example, inventoried a table “encrusted with *verd antique*” as part of the furniture of her lodgings during her stay in Rome, while Mariana Starke (1762-1838) recalled viewing “a table made of precious marbles” when she visited the Palazzo Barberini.¹¹ For contemporary tourists, such tables not only formed the physical furniture of the interior spaces they visited and the apartments in which they stayed, but also constituted potential pieces of furniture for their own homes, as versions of such tables were routinely available for purchase as souvenirs. At least six specimen table top slabs were included in the ill-fated cargo of the *Westmorland*, a British privateer frigate captured in 1778, which contained fifty-seven crates of art objects collected by aristocratic tourists.¹² Described in the ship’s inventory as “beautiful marble tables inlaid with various fine stones”, the *Westmorland*’s decorative table tops are inlaid with samples of stones arranged in a rigid, geometric format, with each specimen assigned an individual number.¹³ An attendant key for the purpose of distinguishing the marbles would often accompany such slabs, allowing for continued analysis and comparison of the individual specimens upon arrival on British soil.

As such, the specimen table represents a rather typical Grand Tour souvenir, which, alongside collections of antique sculpture, old master paintings, and the Tour portrait, are presented within the secondary literature as the principle souvenirs of the Tourist experience. Echoing Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield’s (1694-1773) advice to his son not to travel “knick-knackilly,” small-scale souvenir objects, and other, more quotidian forms of material culture encountered on the tour, such as books, paper, jewellery, and textiles, have yet to be subjected to sustained critical attention.¹⁴ Yet, focusing on the variety of inclusions within the Parminster’s table allows us to deconstruct some of these distinctions and hierarchies. Though its form is clearly reminiscent of this standard Grand Tour object—the specimen table—it is simultaneously constructed from a diverse array of small-scale souvenirs, fragments and found

¹⁰ For example, in *The Antiquities of Herculaneum*, Martyn & Lettice described a recent excavation at Portici, whose spoils had included “a great quantity of African marble, out of which some tables were made.” T. Martyn & J. Lettice, *The Antiquities of Herculaneum, Translated from the Italian* (London: J. Taylor, 1773), 1:xi. References are to this edition.

¹¹ H. L. Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany* (London: T. Cadell & A. Strahan, 1789), 2:119-20. References are to this edition. M. Starke, *Travels in Italy, Between the Years 1792 and 1798; Containing A View of the Late Revolutions in that Country* (London: R. Phillips & T. Gillet, 1802), 2:34. References are to this edition.

¹² Elizabeth Fairman, “Cat. 124: Inlaid Decorative Stone Tabletop,” in *The English Prize: The Capture of the Westmorland, An Episode of the Grand Tour*, eds. María Dolores Sánchez-Jáuregui & Scott Wilcox (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), 292.

¹³ Fairman, 292.

¹⁴ *Lord Chesterfield’s Letters to his Son*, ed. Joseph B. Seabury (New York, Boston & Chicago: Silver, Burdett & Co. 1902), 102.

objects, and even mourning devices. As such, the table reinforces the necessity in having a fluid definition of the souvenir, one that comprises both purchased and collected objects, acquired over a long period, and which commemorated far more than the act of travel. Indeed, the Parminters' specimen table variously comprises souvenirs amassed during their Continental tour, found objects that the cousins sourced from their coastal surroundings following their return, as well as familial objects subsequently procured or inherited by the women, demonstrating the souvenir's consonant and constant role in creating narratives of past, present, and future. Though removed from their associated cultures of tour and seashore, once translated into *A la Ronde*, such souvenirs were integrated with familial objects to create highly personal decorative pieces and spaces, a transformation that was at once geographical and semantic. As the integrative use of such objects within the specimen table shows, souvenirs could collapse geographical, temporal, and spatial distances; unifying home and tour, past and present, the generic and the personal.

Morsels and Found Objects

Unlike the rationally-ordered contrasting marbles that usually made up specimen table-tops, the specimens included within *A la Ronde*'s table comprised found shells and small pebbles, semi-precious minerals, and miniaturized or replicative souvenirs such as the micromosaic urns and sulphur casts. This rich assortment of small-scale, fragmentary, and found objects is exemplified by a particular term used during this period; the idea of the "morsel." The term morsel—meaning, in this instance, a small piece or fragment, often broken from a larger mass—had been employed since at least the late fourteenth-century, and by the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, it was frequently used in travel writing, appearing most notably in the published travel accounts of Lady Anna Riggs Miller (1741-81).¹⁵

Miller's highly descriptive epistolary account of her travels to Italy, *Letters from Italy, Describing the Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Paintings &c. of that Country*, was published in three volumes between 1776 and 1777. The text teems with morsels, the narrative capacity of which Miller often harnessed in the creation of her object-focused writing. Echoing the variety of the Parminters' table, Miller fluidly employs the term to describe a wide array of fragmentary objects and found souvenirs; appending it simultaneously to the ruined traces of Italy's classical heritage, the geological specimens that she discovered within its landscape, and the proliferation of precious stones found within the contemporary Italian city. At the Palazzo Caprea in Bologna, Miller described how she "found means to bring away a morsel" taken from a shield lined with human

¹⁵ "morsel, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, www.oed.com/view/Entry/122421. Accessed 23 December 2017.

skin (2:8); whilst *en route* to Mont Cenis, in France, she recalled picking up “morsels” of spar on the roadside, which she conserved and sent back to England (1:70). After a visit to the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, she noted how her party “chose to examine every particular morsel” (2:95) of the art that they had encountered there; and following viewing a cabinet of curiosities, she listed “rubies, emeralds, topazes, sapphires, amethysts, &c.” amongst the “various curious morsels” of its contents (2:117).

Crucially, Miller also used the term to describe the kind of fragmentary specimen tables whose form we see echoed at A la Ronde. While visiting *La Venerie*, a grand palace in the French countryside in 1770, Miller recalled seeing “a table of *lapis lazuli*, which appears to consist of several pieces,” alongside “another table, composed of excellent morsels of lapis, amethyst, and agate, 22 inches broad, and 3 feet 10 inches long” (1:154), two descriptions amongst the many “elegantly intermixed” (2:115) specimen tables that Miller saw during her travels. By using the shared terminology of the morsel to describe these tables, Miller explicitly aligns their construction with the other kinds of morsels that she encountered, directly linking their fragmentary constitutive elements to the found objects and specimens that populate her accounts. Tracing these inclusions as they appear between table and text explicitly relates written accounts of such souvenirs to their presence within the table, locating these complex objects within a reciprocal narratological language that exists between written text and constructed object. Simultaneously examining Miller’s text and the Parminster’s table accordingly demonstrates the simultaneity between object-writing and object-making, a circular relationship in which materiality and narrative are mutually constitutive, and through which the Parminsters’ specimen table functions to tell of the multifarious and multiplicitous narratives of its owner-makers.¹⁶

Miller’s *Letters from Italy* has previously been discussed as an immensely popular guidebook that shows its female author to be a knowledgeable connoisseur of the arts.¹⁷ Yet Miller’s status as collector of objects has received scant attention. Apart from her purchased acquisitions, which included a tortoiseshell comb, inlaid with gold designed “to imitate an Etruscan border, copied from an antique vase,” and prints after Piranesi, Miller also described multiple instances of finding objects within the Italian landscapes that she visited (2:47), the collection and acquisition of which often performs a clear narrative function, directly connected to conveying the experience of travel in her writing. Writing from Naples on 16 March 1771, for example, Miller recounted her visit to the Cumæan Sibyl’s cave, located near Puzzoli:

¹⁶ On object-writing during this period, see Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 405.

The entrance of the Sibyl's Cave is a by road and flat arch; it is so filled up with earth, as to prevent its being penetrated farther than about twenty paces with ease...We entered the cave a few paces, but the arch and ground were so near, that it soon became necessary to get upon our hands and knees...I filled my pockets with some handfuls of the earth, amongst which there are abundance of antique bits of mosaic, broken agate, &c.; and upon examination, found one intaglio of jasper; it represents the sign Scorpio, holding a crescent between the fore-claws, and has a star placed near the tail (2:130).

The material richness of the Sibyl's cave was reiterated by the traveller Selina Martin, who visited in 1819. Writing from Naples on 17 July, Martin described seeing "the famous grotto of the Sybil," "the ground on all sides strewed with beautiful pillars and fragments of marble."¹⁸

Miller's account is a particularly evocative one, describing an uncomfortable crawl along the floor of a cave littered with antiquities, hands dug into the earth in order to excavate its treasures. As such, it is reminiscent of the concern of Richard Wrigley's 2012 article "Making Sense of Rome", which argues that increased attention must be paid "to the role played by the physical environment, and indeed the inherent physicality of the experience of Rome" in our discussions of the Grand Tour.¹⁹ Wrigley suggests that we must move beyond traveller's preoccupations with Rome's (and by extension of this, Italy's) "immanent historical identity", instead focusing on how their interactions with the landscape "transcended mere empirical inspection and activated a sense of corporeal identification".²⁰ While Wrigley restricts his analysis to forms of sensory experience that fall outside of the "possessive commodification" of Grand Tour collecting, his argument in favour of the study of the "emotive kind of act and experience" of tourism works particularly well for discussing traveller's embodied experiences with material objects, both during and after their tours.²¹

The "inherent physicality" of travel and its relationship with object-acquisition is a recurring theme within late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women's travel writing, as evident in Mary Berry's (1763-1852) account of her visit to the Villa Doria Pamphilli in Rome in 1820. In her recollection of the outing, Berry wrote of an intimate audience with the surviving collections of its

¹⁸ Selina Martin, *Narrative of a three years' residence in Italy, 1819-1822* (Dublin: W. F. Wakeman, 1831), 99. References are to this edition.

¹⁹ Richard Wrigley, 'Making Sense of Rome', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2012), 551-564.

²⁰ Wrigley, 552, 554.

²¹ Wrigley, 561.

former owner, Olimpia Maidalchini (1591-1657). In Maidalchini's "cabinet of rarities," Berry described viewing cases filled with ivory, coral, and amber, "bundles of empty purses," a "Japan box," a "coffer contain[ing] a number of artificial flowers, faded, tumbled, and all squeezed together," a "number of little pasteboard boxes, containing each six small wash balls, in cotton, still much perfumed," and finally, a box "full of very thin brown and some whitish leather, stamped in all sorts of patterns and for all sorts of purposes."²²

Berry's evocative literary transcription of this space culminates in her acquisition of a material remembrance of this collection, as permitted by the property's custodian, who allowed her to take "a little bit of the pierced leather," "a border of lace, three of the wash balls, and two bits of the artificial flowers."²³ Berry's anecdote, in which the material and literary souvenirs of her experience at the Villa Pamphilli operate simultaneously, exemplifies the varied means by which travellers acquired souvenirs during this period. At the same time, her experiences reinforce the sensory and emotive nature of the tour, from her handling of the objects, to the sense of intimacy and privilege established between Berry, the custodian of the room, and ultimately, its contents.

Berry's anecdote is typical of a number of travel accounts in which the acquisition of souvenirs extended provocatively beyond the act of purchase, comprising found, stolen, and gifted objects collected by travellers, and which accordingly suggest the experiential and corporeal nature of object-acquisition during the tour. While staying at Valle d'Aosta in Italy in 1792, Elizabeth Fox, Baroness Holland (1771-1825), described dismounting from her carriage at Monjoet in order to obtain specimens of the "steatites and garnets imbedded in quartz" from the roadside.²⁴ Similarly, when having been impeded by difficult terrain, Miller was unable to view the *Caduta della Marmora* cascade at Terni, she subsequently wrote to her mother that her husband, who had continued alone, had returned with incrustations formed from its spray, "some of which he brought me in his pocket," and which served to represent the experience in which Miller could not partake in material form (2:292).

Tourists' accounts also emphasised the sensory nature of this kind of acquisition. While visiting from Vesuvius on 21 January, 1788, Ann Flaxman (1760-1820), wife of the sculptor John Flaxman, described her contentment at picking "up a piece of the sulphurous matter which was rather too hot too hold however I manag'd to keep it & with a double satisfaction turn'd my Back on this Curiosity."²⁵ Similarly, Piozzi recalled how the *solfaterra* of the volcano burned her fingers

²² *Extracts of the Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry*, ed. T. Lewis (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1865), 3:269-70.

²³ Lewis, 3:271.

²⁴ *The Journal of Elizabeth, Lady Holland*, ed. The Earl of Ilchester (London, New York, Bombay & Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1908), 1:63.

²⁵ Ann Flaxman, *Journal, 1787-1788*, Add MS 39787, British Library, London, 70.

as she “plucked an incrustation off,” with both examples attesting to the embodied experience of finding, holding, and collecting objects (2:68). In each of these accounts, it is the narrative of object-acquisition that is privileged. From gifts to stolen fragments, rocks which burnt fingertips, and classical gemstones unearthed from ancient soil, these anecdotes highlight the sensory, experiential, and emotional dimensions of acquiring souvenirs. This was particularly true of the found object, whose finding and subsequent preservation crystallised these narratives into the souvenir itself, ensuring its commemorative function once taken home.

Home and Away

The Parminters’ own collections are heavily comprised of found objects, sourced from tour and home alike, and which were subsequently incorporated into the interiors and furnishings of their home at A la Ronde. The cousins’ bookcase *cum* curiosity cabinet, includes numerous mineralogical specimens acquired during their travels, while the house’s famous shell gallery comprises an diverse combination of natural found objects, including shells, feathers, lichen, mica, spar, and animal bones, supplemented with mirrored glass, paint, cut paper, and pottery sourced from their local environment.²⁶

The carefully selected location of A la Ronde, which was strategically positioned to allow vistas of Exmouth, the Devonshire coast, and the estuary of the River Exe, affirms the house’s deliberate and deep connection with its surrounding countryside. Exmouth was famous for the evocative prospects afforded by its coastal walks, as well as the botanical and conchological richness of its beaches, which provided the Parminters with a plethora of shells necessary for the gallery’s fabrication, as well as the materials for the shell-work elements included within their specimen table.²⁷ As charted by Beth Fowkes Tobin, shellwork had grown in popularity throughout the course of the century, and was, by its end, synonymous with the creation and decoration of fashionable semi-interior spaces, such as garden follies.²⁸ Richard Beatniffe’s *The Norfolk Tour* of 1773, for example, provides a detailed description of the grotto of a “Mrs. Styleman,” which was “very prettily contrived out of a boat, by cutting it in halves, and fixing it together with a little addition.”²⁹ Like the shell gallery of A la Ronde, which itself was decorated

²⁶ Meller, p. 15.

²⁷ On Exmouth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see: Martin Dunsford, *Miscellaneous observations, in the course of two tours* (Tiverton, 1800), 84. Edward Donovan, *The natural history of British shells* (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1804), 1:21, 2:68-69 & 5:88.

²⁸ Beth Fowkes Tobin, “The Duchess’s Shells: Natural History Collecting, Gender, and Scientific Practice,” in *Daly Material Women, 1750-1950: Consuming Desires and Collecting Practices*, eds. Maureen Daly Goggin & Beth Fowkes Tobin (Burlington: Ashgate 2009), 247-264.

²⁹ Richard Beatniffe, *The Norfolk Tour or, Traveller’s Pocket Companion* (Norwich, 1773), 53. References are to this edition.

to resemble a cave, the grotto was “stuck full of spar, shells, sea-weed, coral, glass, ore, &c. all disposed with taste and elegance” (53). Purposely employing materials derived from the local area, these inclusions imbued the space with echoes of the local natural environment and the memories of collecting such objects. This was reminiscent of a number of contemporary grottoes. William Bray’s *Sketch of a tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire* (1778), for example, described a grotto made “with the spars &c. found in the neighbourhood,” while Thomas Broderick’s *Letters from several parts of Europe, and the East* (1753) prompted his correspondent to remember how she and her sisters had honoured the moonstones found on their estate with a place in their grotto.³⁰

As in Devon, the Italian shoreline was a particularly rich source of objects. During her time in Puzzoli, for example, Miller wrote of children who ran

after strangers with plates full of mosaic of various colours, amongst which you may frequently find medals, intaglios, and engravings on gems, such as agates, cornelians, &c.; these the sea throws up on the beach, and may be purchased for a trifle (2:105).

Several contemporary writers and antiquarians confirm Miller’s account of treasure-strewn Puzzolean beaches. For example, Percival Barlow wrote in 1791 that “the coins, seals, &c. which have been thrown up by the waves, sufficiently demonstrate [the town’s] former magnificence.”³¹ In the same year, Rudolf Erich Raspe correspondingly noted that at Centuripi, “beautiful and numerous fragments of Cameos are still found; and from the great number of every sort of engraved stones, which are daily found on the sea-shore, and in the vicinity of *Naples, Baja, and Puzzoli*.”³²

Beyond confirming the immediate acquisitive experience of travel, Miller’s description of beach-combing fishermen’s children evokes an image of parity, in which acquisitive tourists could walk upon the beach and collect the objects that covered its shores, just as they might at home. As a prospective found object, Miller’s accounts of lapidary discoveries directly connects such gemstones with the kinds of found objects embedded within the Parminers specimen table, particularly its shells, which were similarly acquired after being washed onto the sea shore, attesting to the connection between practices enacted at home and abroad.

³⁰ William Bray, *Sketch of a tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire* (London: B. White, 1778), 100. T. Broderick, *Letters from several parts of Europe, and the East. Written in the years 1750, &c.* (London, 1753), 51.

³¹ Percival Barlow, *The General History of Europe; and entertaining traveller* (London, 1791), 320.

³² Rudolf Erich Raspe, *A descriptive catalogue of a general collection of ancient and modern engraved gems, cameos as well as intaglios, taken from the most celebrated cabinets in Europe, and cast in red pastes, white enamel, and sulphur, by James Tassie, modeller; arranged and described by Raspe* (London: J. Murray, 1791), 1:xxviii.

Read against tourists' descriptions of the historical artefacts, shells, and geological specimens that they found during the course of their travels, the Parminters' combinative use of found objects from their tour and local Devonshire landscapes, physically and ideologically unites the spaces of home and abroad. Whether by gathering specimens, receiving gifts, or even theft, such examples demonstrate that the souvenirs of Continental travel were obtained by a variety of means that fell outside the traditional narrative of Grand Tour collecting, constituting highly personal modes of acquisition, intimately tied to the experience and commemoration of travel, as well as the activities of the traveller once home. Through a focus on the experiential and emotional nature of souvenir collecting from both home and abroad, A la Ronde emerges as a space that is not defined by objects that reflect an inherent femininity, but by the interconnecting and subjective identities of its inhabitants, in which they are simultaneously women, family members, travellers, and residents of Devon. Rather than presenting the relics of a uniquely feminine Continental tour then, the Parminters' collection of souvenirs constitutes an evocative combination of objects—fragments from Italy, Devon and beyond—which through their collection and subsequent movement into the space of A la Ronde, linked the Parminters' experiences past and present, while simultaneously reflecting their intimate familial collections.

Family histories

In the Parminters' replicative specimen table, the reproduction of objects seen whilst travelling directly related the visual and material experience of travel to its souvenirs. Recalling how, and in what forms, tourists encountered objects whilst abroad, it simultaneously demonstrates their continued significance once home, where travel became a crucial element in the construction of self and space alike. Both the acquisition of the Parminters' souvenirs, and their subsequent translation into the decorative scheme of their home, involved communal acts of consumption and production; conjuring shared experiences of tourism, collection, and making.

At home and abroad, souvenir objects were collected in acts of communal sociability. In her *Narrative of a three years' residence in Italy* (1831), Martin described combing the rocky Neapolitan coast with her young niece Anny, recalling how she had found “exhaustless amusement in exploring rocky caverns [and] crags to collect shells and coral” (56). Likewise, the travel journal of the young tourist Mary Anne Keene records her family walking “upon the sands to pick up shells” in Carmarthenshire; an activity she recalled partaking in with her mother, father, and aunt.³³ The communal enactment and reproduction of such practices within the space of A la Ronde was also part of the haptic and collective experience of making that characterises the house's decoration

³³ Mary Anne Keene, *Diary*, 1794, MS225, Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham, 20.

more broadly. This communal fabrication of objects firmly connected the aesthetic with the emotional, a relationship that will be explored more fully in the final section of this article. Recalling both the experience of the tour and their lives in Devon, the relocation and adaptation of such objects—here, their inclusion within the specimen table—entangled these souvenirs within the broader narrative of the Parminter family as a whole, a story that not only predated Jane and Mary’s cohabitation, but which continues beyond it in how we as historians understand the house and its contents.

Besides the numerous souvenirs, shells, and other objects amassed from both home and abroad, the collections of A la Ronde are characterised by another kind of souvenir: a large number of inherited visual and material objects that refer to, or were produced by, the various members of the Parminter family. An evocative combination of full scale-portraits, painted miniatures, handmade silhouettes, watercolour paintings, pencil drawings, and illustrated coats of arms, proliferate throughout the space of A la Ronde, acting analogously to the other assemblages of objects we see throughout the rest of the house. Examples include Mary Parminter’s silhouette portrait of Mrs. and Rev. Walrond (d. 1769), labelled on the reverse in her handwriting “My dear Grandfather and Grandmother Walrond’s profiles;” functioning as a touching evocation of her dead grandparents. Similarly, the delicate watercolours of Mary Walrond, later Mrs Richard Parminter (1747-1772), provide a familial precedent for Jane and Mary’s own creative practices. Pertaining to the Parminter, Hurlock, Walrond, and Frend branches of the family, these images and objects are associated with multiple generations of members of several intertwined families, and date from the late seventeenth century until the 1790s.

When the construction of the specimen table is read against these objects and the history of the Parminter family more broadly, its status as a familial object assumes new significance. Shortly after the Parminters’ return from their Tour, the family was faced with the death of Jane’s younger sister, Elizabeth, who died in Malmesbury in around 1790.³⁴ As documented by a number of historians, the tour was often an inherently familial and social undertaking, with the Parminters’ travels no exception. Reichel observed that the travellers were a party of four, whom we know to have comprised of Jane and her cousin Mary, Elizabeth, and a fourth unidentified female participant.³⁵ Beyond these immediate companions, Jane also described meeting various acquaintances (familial and otherwise) throughout the course of their journey from London and across the Continent.³⁶ Jane’s short tour journal accordingly conveys the profoundly social

³⁴ Adams, 1.

³⁵ Adams, 7. Reichel, 267.

³⁶ For example, when the party set off from London on 22 June 1784, Jane records travelling through Greenwich, Rochester, and Canterbury, where she dined at the home of her elder sister Maryanne and her brother-in-law “Mr.

experience of travel. Perhaps the companionship that Jane, Mary, and, to a lesser extent Elizabeth, themselves experienced throughout the course of this journey would prove highly formative for their future relations, cementing a bond between cousins that would become a crucial impetus for their co-habitation at A la Ronde. Accordingly, both the Parminters' collection of souvenirs and their fabrication of decorative furnishings employing them, reflect the emotional, as well as the aesthetic, nature of travel. This relationship between travel, emotion, and experience was compounded by the death of Elizabeth, whose passing transformed their tour souvenirs into objects that commemorated travel and travel companion alike.

Mourning was directly associated with the space and place of tourism. Many tourists died *en route*, having travelled to the Continent to alleviate their illnesses and benefit from the warmer climate.³⁷ For example, Berry, who had lost her father at Genoa in 1817, recalled going to the cemetery with her sister Agnes where they “gathered flowers and shed tears upon my father’s tomb”; while Martin had lost both her niece and her brother-in-law during her family’s residence in Italy (351).³⁸ In her account of the “painful retrospection” she experienced during her travels, Martin located her reminiscences materially, relating them directly with her experiences of collecting specimens of petrified shells with her young niece (351). Confronted by the death of a relative so close to a tour, the objects collected during its duration would take on new associations of the loved one and partaker. As such, this process extends the function of the souvenir—an object already so intimately connected with the processes of commemoration—to remind viewers of both the act of travel as well as its participants. As Martin’s reminiscences of collecting shells with her niece affirm, these objects were often collected in an act of communal sociability, imbuing the materials with the associations of the place in which they were found, as well as a heightened affective significance. Such accounts of shell-collecting accordingly root the Parminters’ interiors in relation to narratives of intimacy and emotion, combining memories of their tour with those of familial closeness.

Beyond the social significance of the found object, the specimen table’s central porcelain plaque, which depicts a vestal virgin and reads “LIFE SHALL TRIUMPH OVER DEATH,” also confirms that the communication of bereavement was central to its function (fig. 3). Subscribing to the contemporary visual language of mourning, the inclusion of this plaque transfigures the meaning of the table, transforming it from an object that replicated the kinds of tables seen and

Frend,” before proceeding to Dover. The next day, Jane describes calling “at Mr. Stringers” before departure. Reichel, 266. Correspondingly, Reichel notes that a passport was issued at Rome on 16 April 1786 “to Mary’s brother, John Parminter, authorising him to travel with his servant to Naples,” confirming his presence in Italy at the same time as their tour. Reichel, 266.

³⁷ Jeremy Black, *The British and the Grand Tour* (London: Routledge, 2011), 90.

³⁸ Lewis, (3:164).

available for purchase in Italy, to one of personal commemoration, encompassing and evoking the interlinked narratives of tour, home, and family. The Parminters' specimen table visually and materially signalled to the viewer an absence from the tightly bound homosocial culture of A la Ronde, transforming a traditional souvenir into a biographically and emotionally loaded object.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Jane & Mary Parminter, Table, 1790s.

Glass, Mineral, Shell, Paint, Paper, Wood

National Trust Collections, A la Ronde, Devon.

Far from a simple bricolage of purchased and found objects that imitates the modes of aesthetic display witnessed during the Parminters' tour, A la Ronde's table simultaneously performs an explicitly dedicatory function, serving to commemorate the loss of Elizabeth Parminter. Here then, the souvenir extends its traditional memorial function to enact a further commemorative gesture; acting beyond its capacity to objectify the Parminters' tour, to function as an associative artefact that also refers to the loss of Jane and Mary's beloved travelling companion Elizabeth. In this context, objects such as the ceramic plaque, which specifically refer to the practices of mourning, can be read against those inclusions in the table that were acquired both at Exmouth and on their tour. Read as a whole, the table attests to the nature of A la Ronde as not merely a homosocial space, but a distinctively familial one, in which the diverse histories of the Parminter were constructed by, and reflected within the objects, surfaces, and spaces that they crafted. Consequently, when situated within the Parminters' home, these historical and familial heirlooms were not merely genealogical relics, but also acted as souvenirs redolent with familial narratives, complementing those told by the souvenirs of Exmouth or the tour. Just like an heirloom, whose function Susan Stewart identifies as weaving "by means of a narrative, a significance of blood relation," at A la Ronde, the souvenir also acts as a kind of biographical object, and consequently, a site of potent familial association.³⁹ Accordingly, it is crucial not to disentangle the Parminters' souvenirs into categories of home and abroad, of the feminine and the familial. Instead, the evocative combination of objects found at A la Ronde helps us to understand how souvenirs functioned narratively as fragments of subjective experience, memory, and association in the Parminters' creation of a space that was distinctively their own.

³⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (10th ed. Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2007), 137.

Conclusions

On 15 March 1771, Miller wrote to her mother to describe her recent sojourns around the environs of Naples. Having visited Pozzuoli, Baia, and the tomb of Agrippina, the party then proceeded to “to the Elysian fields,” where they saw farming land peppered with ancient tombs and urns filled with coins and medals. Describing how the ground had recently been excavated in search of its hidden treasures, she wrote how “the plough in its progress incessantly turns up morsels of vases, broken architectural ornaments of fine marble, and admirable workmanship; and not unfrequently large pieces of alabaster and porphyry, to which we were ourselves witness.” Continuing, Miller recalled the use of these morsels by local farmers in walls, before complaining how “mutilated statues and bustos” were degraded to “rustic purposes”:

We saw some women grinding corn in a singular manner, and quite new to us: they were seated on the ground, and one held between her feet a piece of hollowed marble, which, on a nearer examination, proved a beautiful fragment of a column of the Ionic order, that ornamental spiral part called the volute. I was quite fretted at seeing the use these bedlams make of what probably belonged to some superb temple respected by the masters of the world, on these once glorious coasts. It was of *alabastro agatizo* (alabaster with large veins of agate). She threw the corn into the hollow, and laying fast hold of the volute with one arm, by the assistance of arms and legs prevented it from slipping, whilst with her other hand, furnished with an antique moulding suiting her purpose, she worked the corn round and round, till the husks came away from it. (2:110-111).

In her description of the Elysian Fields, Miller once again highlights the narratological potential of these fragments, evocatively recalling a landscape strewn with the remnants of a lost ancient society, whose misappropriation in the present causes her both consternation and disbelief. In co-opting these fragments, the women who employed such volutes for their agricultural benefaction demonstrated a flagrant ignorance of their historical associations, an oversight that the classically versed Miller was at pains to ignore. Beyond Miller’s own disapproval however, this anecdote demonstrates how the fragmentation of a historical object distanced it from its heritage, constituting a physical and semantic process of distillation and reappropriation.

Once again employing the terminology of the morsel, Miller’s description of the misinformed farmer at the Elysian Fields linguistically relates her account to the specimen

tables she saw at *La Venerie*. Like the seized volute, the fragments of lapis lazuli that constituted the specimen table described by Miller evoke similar processes of historical distancing and recontextualisation, which thanks to the morsels' subsumption within the surface of the tabletop, and subsequent display within the manor house, work to create new narratives that unify the past and present of the object's biography. In its new function, the volute is at once a historical object and agricultural implement. The fragmentary form of A la Ronde's own specimen table, constructed from shells, semi-precious minerals, and small-scale souvenirs, similarly recalls how these morsels could tell numerous simultaneous histories; at once evoking the moment of object-acquisition, the spaces and places of the tour, and the local landscapes of Devon. Once recontextualized within the specimen table's surface, and displayed in the distinctively familial space of A la Ronde, these souvenir morsels took on yet another layer of meaning, telling new stories of those family members with whom these experiences were enacted. As such, the morsels, specimens, and souvenirs that comprise the table, encourage us to think in new ways about how the souvenir functioned in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Britain, where it existed somewhere between history and experience, between memory and narrative.

In her seminal text *On Longing* (1993), Susan Stewart has highlighted the continuing narrative capacity of the souvenir, writing that it does not recall the "narrative of the object", but "the narrative of the possessor."⁴⁰ Understood in this manner, the souvenir is not the final objectification of a journey, but the point of embarkation for subsequent narratives articulated through its successive interactions with its owner(s). A la Ronde's specimen table demonstrates how the physical translation of a souvenir from one site to another was echoed by an intellectual and emotional transference of meaning that occurred between object and maker, and subsequently, object and viewer, once the souvenir was reused in its new setting. Commemoration was not a quality integral to the constituent elements of the specimen table, but an associative meaning that came to be imbued within it through the processes of acquisition, transportation, and contextualisation; with the Parminters' selection and combination of souvenirs resulting in a semantic transformation of these collected objects into a mourning device dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Parminter. It is highly significant then, that the Parminters did not purchase a premade specimen slab whilst visiting the Continent, but instead recreated such items using traditional marble fragments alongside an assortment of personally meaningful small-scale souvenirs and found objects. It was this combination of objects that imbued them with the memorial and emotional significance that a pre-fabricated table would have lacked, allowing both

⁴⁰ Stewart, 136.

found morsels and 'mass-produced' objects to act in a biographical capacity, which in turn facilitated the creation of personal narratives within a once-generic type of souvenir.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3